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RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

BY W. ROBERTSON NICOLL.

It is a hundred years since Emerson was born, and more than twenty years since he died; but, even now, the time has not come for an estimate of his just place among the literary and spiritual forces of the world. What we may say is, that he gave the first distinctively American impulse in literature, that he exercised an extraordinary influence in stimulating without maddening, and that the force he exerted has so far proved abiding. When Emerson died about the same time as Darwin, it was recognized everywhere that America and England had lost their most potent intellectual forces and their most shining intellectual glories. Emerson, however, was more than an intellectual leader. He was, and is, the spiritual guide of many thousands. It was recorded lately that the most reactionary and powerful of Russian statesmen kept always on the table beside him the Essays of Emerson, and referred to them as an oracle. I can testify to the mighty force with which he acted on the minds of young men in Scotland early in the sixties. The absence of a copyright convention between America and Great Britain had some good effects. Many in the old country who could not afford to buy the new books of Carlyle and Tennyson, were able to purchase the innumerable cheap reprints of Lowell, Longfellow, Emerson, Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe and others. Young men, now in middle life, knew these authors from cover to cover, and lived by them. Very recently, a shilling edition of Emerson's Essays was published in England, and twenty thousand copies were sold at once. It is well worth while to review this great and distinctively American man of letters when the most glowing prophecies of American ascendancy in the world are being fulfilled before our eyes.

I.

There was an extraordinary unity and consistency in Emerson's career. He struck the key-note of all his writing in his essay on Nature, when he said:

"The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs?"

This was Emerson's watchword from the beginning to the end. He did not disparage the past. Much of his work was done in making his people familiar with the great men, thoughts and deeds of other times and lands. His ancestors were not only Puritan but clerical, and he derived much from them. The Reverend Peter Bulkeley, Rector of Odell on the Ouse, in the time of Laud, had Mr. Emerson as his direct descendant. He was driven out of the country by Laud for his Nonconformist practices, and in middle life sold all his property and crossed the seas to New England, and founded the town of Concord. He was pious to the very core, and, like Mr. Emerson, he was a scholar. But with all his affection for the past, Emerson was a man of the new time and the New World, and he did what he could to throw an ideal radiance round his own country. He began by recognizing gladly the new facts brought to light by investigation. Indeed, like Tennyson, he anticipated them in a manner. His essay on Nature is prefaced by the significant lines:

"A subtle chain of countless rings
The next unto the farthest brings.
The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose.
And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form."

It is true that 1830 was the year of the great debate on fixity of type between Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, but there were only few among poets and philosophers who knew what had happened, though Goethe understood it well. Long after, Kingsley's attitude towards the new science was properly described as "fearless and helpless." From the start, Emerson turned a fearless and joyful face to every fresh discovery. Though not a scientific

observer himself, he asked why America should not have a poetry and philosophy of nature. This attitude brought him the tribute of men like Professor Tyndall, who wrote in his copy of "Nature" "*Purchased by Inspiration.*"

But Emerson was loyal to all truth without loss of reverence. He never abandoned his faith in the supremacy of the divine in the world. This was a faith which could watch without dismay, indeed with eager sympathy, the progress of the intellect. For Emerson gave a mystic baptism to science. Said Tyndall:

"Not only is Emerson's religious sense entirely undaunted by the discoveries of science, but all such discoveries he comprehends and assimilates. By Emerson, scientific conceptions are continually transmuted into the finer forms and warmer hues of an ideal world."

It was fundamental with him that truth could be comprehended by intuition. The principles of Transcendentalism are to be felt as religious emotions, or grasped by the imagination as a poetic whole. They are not to be proved, neither are they to be set down in proportion as the articles of a creed. The truth comes to us not when we are critical, not when we are working, but when we are receptive and passive. The knowledge thus conveyed does not require to be defined. Its foundation need not be strengthened. If we enter the innermost temple of the Absolute, as Emerson says we can, we shall know that we have been there. To affirm the experience is our business. To affirm it in words that adorn it, was the task to which Emerson triumphantly addressed himself.

Bearing in mind Emerson's intense dislike of creeds in this age of the world, we may state his ruling intuitions. He affirmed the doctrine of the Over-Soul—that under the changing phenomena and below the jarring strife of atoms and men there lies a single First Cause; an infinite, eternal and perfect Substance; a divine noumenon of which earthly phenomena are manifestations. Nature and the soul alike are informed by it, and they are governed by the same laws. These laws are Progress and Righteousness. The whole world is an omen of good. If humanity places itself in right relations with God and nature, it must be purified and elevated. The more complete the surrender, the more perfect will be the peace. So long as man remains out of harmony with the Over-Soul, all things are hostile and incomprehensible. Emerson declined to affirm the personality of the Divine Substance,

but he had no doubt that the nature of things was kind and righteous. Every soul was independent and self-determined, but bound to submit its selfish instincts to the universal law and thus become divine. When the soul opened itself to the Ideal, and admitted the inflowing of the Over-Soul, there was a tide of ecstasy—the human and the divine were merged. Optimism was but the direct inference from these propositions. Accepted frankly, they would result in a serene belief in the nature of things and the hopefulness of man's estate, and in a complete refusal to believe in the indifference and cruelty of the sum of things.

The doctrine of Transcendentalism bored Oliver Wendell Holmes and many others. It has been said that Holmes's monograph on Emerson is "The Natural History of the Wood Thrush by a Canary Bird." But it has been claimed for Transcendentalism that it is no American idiosyncrasy, no novel product of a virgin soil, but one of the oldest and proudest of human philosophies. It has been followed from its earliest records through Grecian speculation, through Neoplatonism, through the despairing nobility of Roman Stoicism, through mediæval Mysticism, through the mathematical arguments of Spinoza, through the orthodox shapings of Swedenborg, to the extreme philosophies of German Idealism. In Emerson, however, and in his true followers, there are distinctive notes. The most remarkable is the supremacy given to ethics, these ethics being practically the ethics of Christianity. In debates still carried on between ethical thinkers on practical questions, Emerson's vote would have gone always with the Christians. Emersonian, also, is the unfaltering and even exalted optimism in which Emerson lived and died. It will be seen that Transcendentalism has much in common with Christianity, especially on the ethical side. But from the Christianity of the Apostles and the Church it is sharply separated by its denial of the supernatural. The special claim of the Christian Religion is the claim to finality. "God . . . hath in these last days spoken to us by his Son." "Once in the end of the world He appeared." These days are the last days. Christ is the last word of God. But Emerson denies miracle and denies also the finality of any book or any Redeemer.

"That the administration of eternity is final, that the God of revelation has seen cause to repent and botch up the ordinances of the God of nature, I hold it not only irreverent but impious in us to assume."

To him all religions were alike imperfect and useful, and the wise man keeps his mind open and receptive to everything of good that floats by him from whatever source. It is degrading to depend wholly on the past.

"If a man claims to speak and know all God and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not."

The fountain of inspiration was still flowing. The soul that kept itself quiet and expectant would receive light. So, better books than the Bible would be written, higher characters than the Christ would appear. "We, too, must write bibles to unite the heavenly and the earthly worlds." There can be no final teacher.

"The man has never lived who can feed us ever. The human mind cannot be enshrined in a person who shall set any barrier on one side to this unbounded, unboundable empire."

Christ was one of many gifted spirits with whom the Over-Soul had direct communication. He was to be revered, but one day he would be estimated and set aside for another, while whatever was true in his words and acts would continue to live. Nobler prophets than Christ were yet to come in the eternal progress. Emerson speaks with reticence about Christ, but we may gather that he questioned the accuracy of the Gospel history in many parts, not merely the miracles, but also the record of the words. But even if criticism had accomplished its task in separating between the false and the true, Emerson would by no means have admitted that Christ was infallible. He looked for another.

I think some stress ought to be laid on Emerson's expectation of a Messiah. His attitude was almost Jewish. A Messiah was due from God. He would probably be an American Messiah. Americans must not miss him. Where would the Messiah be found? Emerson's study had convinced him that the Messiah would appear among the "cranks," so-called. "*None of the princes of this world knew.*" So he was amazingly tolerant to men like Bronson Alcott and Thoreau, women like Margaret Fuller and experiments like Brook Farm. He viewed them with an open and hopeful mind. The regeneration of the world, in his judgment, would come from some modern seer. And though he was keenly alive to the occasional absurdities in "The Dial"

and its contributors, he was tolerant and more than tolerant. He would have smiled at the lady who inquired at a lecture, "Mr. Alcott, does Omnipotence abnegate attribute?" It is difficult to believe that he was not amused at the words with which "The Dial" ended: "Energize about the Hecatic sphere." But he was loyal for all that. No one valued Alcott so highly. He would listen to him when the rest had fled. Of Thoreau he said, "Wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty he will find a home." When Margaret Fuller died, he said, "My audience is gone." He made haste to welcome Walt Whitman, though it is said that his admiration of the poet abated. There is nothing more striking in the correspondence between Carlyle and Emerson than their respective attitudes to the mild-eyed Buddhas who appeared from time to time. Carlyle had no patience with men like Alcott. Emerson saw all that Carlyle saw, but he saw deeper and farther. There is no correspondence between men of equal intellectual rank which shows so little intellectual sympathy. In the end of the day, the difference between Carlyle and Emerson was a difference of first principles. Carlyle was so deeply imbued with a belief in the depravity of the human race, that he ceased to have hope. Emerson never weakened in his optimism, neither was he discouraged by the appearance of many false Messiahs. He looked upon them as the inevitable precursors of the true Christ.

It follows that he practically disclaimed all finality, save for some foundation principles. There is nothing in his writing of the intense dogmatism on doubtful matters which has sent so many books on philosophy to the shelf. Those who lived through the period when Huxley and Tyndall seemed to dominate the intellectual world in England, will remember the calm assumption that the ways of thinking among scientific men in the latter part of the nineteenth century would endure forever. Emerson was always looking forward to the long future, and he knew very well that the centuries would bring innumerable changes. He held fast, however, to the truth of intuition, to the kindness and righteousness of the great First Cause. There was a day when American thinkers became concerned at Emerson's reliance on intuition. They complained that he set it in the place of thought; that he imagined that culture could come without work; that one's own insight could be defended without regard to facts and argu-

ments. While they admitted that under the hands of the master the instrument worked not ill, and recalled Emerson's part in the great struggles of the time, they considered that much of the feeble talk of their own day and much of the lack of thorough, deliberate, careful, exact investigation, was due to the laziness and flimsiness of ill-instructed and slothful disciples. There is now no need to fear for the future of scientific research in America, and it may even seem as if the special work that Emerson did in the enforcement of the spiritual is more needed and more precious than ever before. Emerson warned us not to expect from research what research could never give. The world, he insisted, was too young, by some ages yet, to form a creed.

"Far be from me the impatience which cannot brook the supernatural and the vast. Far be from me the lust of explaining away all that appeals to the imagination and the great presentiments that haunt us. Willingly I, too, say 'Hail!' to the unknown, awful powers which transcend the ken of the understanding."

II.

From Emerson's thought comes his style; they cannot be criticised apart. His friend, Bronson Alcott, in a sketch of Emerson which shows true insight, says that his is a poet's, not a logician's, power. "He states, pictures, and sketches, he does not reason." His style is Runic, Orphic, mystical, aphoristic. He was himself passionately fond of condensation. Letter-writing he disliked as too plain and familiar. He did not marshal his sentences or order his thoughts to reach the desired end. One critic says that he was a lapidary and not an architect; another complains that many of his pages are abracadabra. He is severely condemned by Whately in his preface to Bacon's Essays, for his manifold transgression of rules. We may admit all this without the least compunction. He does sometimes "cast forth his ice like morsels." His utterances must stand or fall by themselves; they cannot be labelled and placed in pigeon-holes. His qualities were excellently defined by Carlyle, as "brevity, simplicity, softness, homely grace, with such a penetrating meaning, soft enough to be irresistible, going down to the depths and up to the heights, as silent electricity goes." His phrases are "rammed with thoughts." It has been pointed out how he improved Tacitus by translating "*Praefulgebant eo ipso quod non visebantur*," into "They glared

through their absences." His was the power to turn a book into a page, a page into a phrase, and a phrase into a word.

His high imagination and his noble thought were enough to make his style peculiarly impressive and arresting, but it owes its special characteristics to the fact that he did not believe in system. He knew that the system-makers die. Who will ever reprint the works of Sir William Hamilton or John Stuart Mill? Are the prose writings of Matthew Arnold really alive? Emerson had no wish to found a school. He would not even accommodate himself to formulas. He would not narrow the play of his sympathy and the range of his activity. Philosophers who have a living power have won it by something which transcends system and is much more vital than the theories in which it is clothed. The world was too young for system; further, he was avowedly a pioneer. Though books were pleasant companions to him, they were neither counsellors nor intimates. No author was his master: he relied on his intuitions. Though very original, he would never have claimed originality, or tried to assert priority. His readers come to watch his method with the same keen delight with which his hearers watched it. Alcott tells us how in lecturing he would halt at a new paragraph till he contrived to find a key, unlock the drawer, pull it out and display the treasure.

III.

This immediately raises the question of his place as a poet. It is one of the few questions on which the best critical opinion is not perfectly unanimous, the others, perhaps, being whether Lord Lytton was a great novelist ("he is not a genius," said Emerson), and whether Mrs. Browning was a great poetess. Emerson's ambition was to be a poet. He said himself, in 1835:

"I am born a poet, of a low class, without doubt, yet a poet. It is my nature and my vocation. My singing, to be sure, is very husky and for the most part in prose."

There should be little difficulty in deciding that his differentia was poetical, and in addition he aspired to verse, because "we may speak ideal truth in verse that we may not in prose." His prose passes often into high poetry and even into poetical form. The fine lines,

"I heard, or seemed to hear, the chiding sea
Say, 'Pilgrim, why so late and slow to come?'"

were originally written in prose, without any thought of their rhythmical character. His own view of expression is instructive.

"God does not himself speak prose, but communicates with us by hints, omens, inferences, dark resemblances in objects lying around us."

He says, again, of poetry that:

"it teaches the enormous force of a few words, and, in proportion to the inspiration, checks loquacity. It requires a splendor of expression which carries with it the proof of great thoughts. The great poets are judged by the frame of mind they induce, and to them, of all men, the severest criticism is due."

Emerson's poetry has been criticised with sufficient harshness. Matthew Arnold said that the whole body of Emerson's verse was not worth Longfellow's little poem "The Bridge." This indicated Arnold's limitations. Another critic has ranked his poetry with Carlyle's few rough verses, and has spoken of it as the attempt of a seeress to induce in herself the ecstacy which will not spontaneously visit her. But there is little doubt that Emerson is a great and admirable poet, and that this will be increasingly recognized. To compare his work with that of modern English poets is unprofitable. His affinities, as a poet, were Oriental rather than Western. No doubt his poetry is at variance with the ruling canons, but it remains, and they may not remain. He was a poet of the future, showing in their poetic aspect the great generalizations of science. It must be allowed that he fails in the constant felicity and certainty of expression which mark the highest, but many of his stanzas and short pieces are perfect in their form, and no one has had completer intimacy with nature as the world of beauty and the world of order. Among the least known and loveliest of his verses are these:

"If my darling should depart,
And search the skies for prouder friends,
God forbid my angry heart
In other love should seek amends.

"When the blue horizon's hoop
Me a little pinches here,
Instant to my grave I stoop,
And go find thee in the sphere."

And, as we shall see, his most secret thoughts are expressed under the veil of poetry.

IV.

His pre-eminent sanity in the midst of cranks is the main secret of his attraction. Many who cannot follow his mysticism are drawn to him by that. He was, on one side of him, one of the shrewdest and coolest of Americans. From his works a book might easily be compiled on the conduct of life, which hard-headed business men would distribute among their employees. For example, what could be more practical than his handling of every-day difficulties in his essay on Power? He takes the case of a man hindered by lack of vital force. He tells him that he must concentrate; he must give mind, soul, heart and body to business. Next, he must have recourse to the power of use and routine.

"Six hours every day at the piano only to give facility of touch, and six hours a day at painting only to give command of the odious materials, oil, ochres and brushes. The masters say that they know a master in music only by seeing the pose of the hands on the keys—so difficult and vital an act is the command of the instrument."

He never praises the superficial success, the vulgar hero. It would be impossible to exaggerate the stress he lays on conduct, his patient appeal to the nobler imagination, his constant setting forth of the eternal beauty of the Platonic Ideal.

"The next age will behold God in the ethical laws. The eternal creative and informing force is itself moral and ideal. The moral life is not something into which we drift. It is that whereto we are sent. The moral life is the centre, the genesis and the commanding fact. Morality, then, is the conscious adoption of the Universal as the controlling presence of the Universal in the individual."

"But love me then and only, when you know
Me for the channel of the rivers of God
From deep, ideal, fountal heavens that flow."

He saw in the future a new church based on moral science. It would be at first cold and naked—a babe in a manger again. The church of men would come without shawms or psaltery, or sackbut, but it would have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters, science for symbol and illustration, and it would fast enough gather beauty, music, pictures and poetry. When the mind of man was illuminated, he would throw himself joyfully into the sublime order and become with knowledge what the stones do by structure.

Emerson has been highly and justly valued for the singular

insight of his literary judgment. Those who care little for his Transcendentalism, and think that his chin is in the air whenever he speaks of the greater religions, recognize his royal and certain perception of character and genius. Many of his sentences ring like oracles, as when he says of Goethe, "His affections help him like women employed by Cicero to worm out the secrets of conspirators;" and when he says in his *English Traits*, "The great men of England are singularly ignorant of religion." He is never rude or scornful or arrogant. A native and inalienable benignity characterizes all his judgments, but to the moral idea he is ever faithful. To him genius in man is the Godhead in distribution. Genius is religion, and all the great ages have been ages of faith. "In the voice of genius I hear invariably the moral tone, even when it is disowned in words." Of course he is sometimes in error, as when he says that Shelley is never a poet though he is always poetical in mind; but his lapses are much less frequent than those of Matthew Arnold.

I think it must be admitted that Emerson deliberately shunned the darker aspects of life. He did not face the problem of sin. He has little to say of sorrow, and is far poorer in pathos than his friend Carlyle. Christians may still claim that theirs is the only religion that has effectually measured its strength with sin, sorrow and death. Emerson would have replied to this criticism that he was not a system builder, and that he was not called on to deal with every subject. Perhaps something more may be said. The great griefs of his own life were those of bereavement. His cries after the loss of wife and child, coming from a nature so controlled and calm, are strangely memorable. Other troubles he did not seem to fear. Drudgery, calamity and want, he said, were instructors in eloquence and wisdom; but he never forgot the loss of his little son, and almost his last words were, "Oh, that beautiful boy!" He deeply pondered bereavement as the antagonist to happiness; and, if I am not altogether mistaken, the inner meaning of his poetry is, that human beings should not too deeply engage their affections in a world like this.

"Space is ample, east and west,
But two cannot go abreast,
Cannot travel in it two."

The last word of his hidden wisdom is in the lines:

“Leave all for love;
Yet, hear me, yet,
One word more thy heart behoved,
One pulse more of firm endeavor,—
Keep thee to-day,
To-morrow, forever,
Free as an Arab
Of thy beloved.”

In his last days, like Carlyle, he talked of meeting his dear ones where there is no parting. The approximation to Christianity indicated by such hopes is of the closest kind, and is quite inconsistent with much that Emerson and Carlyle steadfastly taught. As for immortality, he refused to speak clearly. In his youth, writing to John Sterling, then on his death-bed, he said:

“Each of us more readily faces the issue alone than on account of his friend. We find something dishonest in learning to live without friends, while death wears a sublime aspect to each of us.”

Of immortality, the soul, when well employed, was incurious. It was so well that it was sure it would be well. It directed no question to the Supreme Power. The teachings of the High Spirit were abstemious and in regard to particulars negative. But Emerson knew that the soul might be well employed and yet not well, and that for its deepest wound there is but one cure.

V.

The man behind the books, in Emerson's case, was as noble as the noblest of his words. There was no discrepancy between his teaching and his character. From the beginning to the end there is consistent witness to his gracious spiritual charm, his regal suavity, his magnanimity, his patience, his high strain of thought and feeling, his obedience to the heavenly vision. His home life was one of gentle and harmonious peace. “He was,” said Henry James, Sr., “a liberal, divine presence in the house.” Harriet Martineau said of him: “His most transient guests owe to him their experience of what the highest grace of domestic manner may be.” Emerson was nobly faithful to his convictions in the great conflict with slavery. So early as 1844, when the temper of the abolitionists was sufficiently fierce, and they refused even to recognize half converts, they always acknowledged Emerson as their own. In 1864 he wrote:

"I shall always respect the war hereafter. The loss of life, the dreary havoc of comfort and time, are overpaid by the vistas that open to eternal life and eternal law, reconstructing and uplifting society."

The author of "Mark Rutherford" tells us that, when Emerson was last in England, he asked him who were his chief friends in America. He replied:

"I find many among the Quakers. I know one simple old lady, in particular, whom I specially honor. She said to me, 'I cannot think what you find in me worth notice!' Ah!" continued Mr. Emerson, "if she had said 'yea' and the whole world had thundered 'nay' in her ear, she would still have said 'yea.'"

That was why he honored her.

W. ROBERTSON NICOLL.